ACCEPT YOUR ACCEPTANCE

January 15, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 61:1-4
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

"You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased."
Luke 2:22

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" We ask youngsters this, who respond with innocence and charm and great precision, "When I grow up I want to be a cowboy, a figure skater, an astronaut." I wanted to play center field for the Pirates. I'd still like to - only now it's for the Cubs. And we ask it of adolescents and college students and graduates, who have been known to answer what they think the asker wants to hear! Business... Medicine... Law... And we never stop asking the question - of ourselves -because we know we are on a pilgrimage and that we are always growing and becoming and changing, and who knows what we will be next year? Few of us, it seems, know the answer for sure. Most of us sense that what we are really talking about is more than vocation or occupation; we are talking more about our identity... and the meaning of our lives.

One of the documentable differences between life in the late 1980s and the life most of us lived as young people is the manner in which this question is answered. It used to be standard procedure to decide what one wanted to do, go to school to learn how to do it, graduate and begin doing it. You decided to be a teacher, lawyer, nurse, plumber; went somewhere to learn appropriate skills, passed requisite exams, leapt over required hurdles and started a lifetime of living out the decision. To go to college without a vocational goal and life plan was, in many quarters, slightly suspect, an unnecessary luxury. And there were many young men and women who began career tracks long before they were sure, or more probably, on the basis of parental hopes and expectations.

What a revolution we have witnessed! Today the assumption is that most people will have several careers, that ultimate goals may be postponed perhaps indefinitely, that premature decisions and commitments can be more damaging than delayed decisions. Professional schools reflect the revolution. Business schools, I am told, much prefer a mature person with job experience; medical schools accept middle-aged accountants. Theological seminary graduates are likely to be evenly distributed across an age spectrum from 25 to 60.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" It's a process - not a one time event. If you're not sure you know the answer with much specificity, take comfort in the fact that Jesus of Nazareth didn't either - at least until he was thirty.

There is no reason to assume that he did not struggle with what was going to be. Michael Scorsese portrayed a tormented Jesus in "The Last Temptation of Christ," struggling with a sense of vocation and the deeper sense of his identity in a way which made many people uncomfortable. The popular notion is that Jesus always knew what he wanted to be, knew exactly who he was, knew he was God's son and the Savior of the World and what that meant in terms of living his life. Scorsese may have over done it a bit in the interests of making his point, but his Jesus wrestles, literally, with his angels and his demons in the effort to discover who he is and how to be faithful to his sense of vocation.

We know very little about his first thirty years. We know the birth stories. We know that his parents did what Jewish parents were supposed to do: had him circumcized, took him to the temple for rites of purification. We know they returned to Nazareth to live and that the infant grew in stature and in wisdom. The logical assumption is that Joseph continued his work as a carpenter and the young Jesus went to Synagogue School, played with friends, his brothers and sisters, and helped his father. We know that when he was twelve his family went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. When they were on their way back to Nazareth they discovered that he had stayed behind to talk with the religious authorities and teachers. There is a body of literature purporting to describe him as a boy and young man, apocryphal stories about his miraculous powers, but the determination of the church has always been that these stories are mythological, with no basis in fact.

Between the ages of twelve and thirty we know nothing. Joseph, his father, is never mentioned again after the trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve. So the assumption is that he died and that Jesus, the oldest child, succeeded him as head of the family, provider, probably carpenter. We do know that at the age of thirty he found himself listening to the strange and compelling preaching of a man by the name of John the Baptist. John was a distant cousin of Jesus. He lived a peculiar life, alone in the desert, like the desert hermits. His preaching was unrestrained, powerful, dramatic. He looked and sounded like one of those ancient prophets. He proclaimed the nearness of God's kingdom - a new age about to begin. He urged his hearers to prepare and repent by turning to righteousness, by renewing their dedication to God and by sealing their new resolve in the richly symbolic gesture of walking into the Jordan River and allowing John to pour the water over their heads... They called it Baptism.

There is no way to know what preceded that day when Jesus of Nazareth was in the listening crowd. But I do believe it is plausible to assume that he came with a question: that he came out of his own struggle. I do know that each of us listens to the preacher in some sense because we hope to hear a word about who we are and what we are supposed to do. We wouldn't put it that way, of course. We'd say we came because we like the music, or we want the kids to be in Sunday School, or because of brunch at

the Westin, or because we've always gone to church on Sunday morning. But beneath all that, in a remote corner of our heart, we know we are here to listen for a word about who we are and what we are supposed to do. There is no way to know for certain, but I believe that is why Jesus was standing in the mud of the river bank, listening to this improbable prophet, out of his own sense that carpentry was not the answer to the question; there was something deeply within him which was insisting on being expressed. I don't have any trouble at all imagining his eyes filling with tears as he resolves to respond more fully to his own sense of incompleteness, maybe even discontent and frustration, by saying an unqualified "yes" to God and to take a risk. He took the risk of appearing foolish in the eyes of his family and friends, a risk of social quarantine reserved for religious fanatics and political zealots, the risk of humiliation as the muddy water was poured down over his head and face and shoulders.

And what the narratives all affirm is that it was a turning point for him; that from this day, Jesus, the Nazareth carpenter, lived with a disciplined obedience to God, a totality of commitment no one had ever seen before. So we pay careful attention to his commissioning. We pay attention because we might learn something about our own quest... Our first observation is that he wasn't told what to do. There were no specific vocational instruction about how to go about being a Messiah. What Jesus got from the experience was a sense of who he was.

The experience was both private and public. The voice and the spirit descending like a dove were for him. There is no suggestion in the text that anyone else heard or saw. The voice told him who he was, "You are you my beloved son - I am pleased with you." But the experience also turned him around so that he knew he was now involved in God's ongoing work in the world. The experience changed his life. He didn't simply return to his carpentry with a surer sense of identity and fewer nightmares. His personal response to grace was a life of obedience and service and teaching and healing and self-giving love.

Christian faith begins with something like that Baptismal experience of Jesus. The essence of the Christian faith is grace; the unconditional love and acceptance of God. The essence of Christian experience is the sense of personal value and self worth which is the result of knowing God's love. It is what is good about the Good News. We are loved and accepted by the one who created us.

It sounds so very simple. But, of course, it isn't. We have trouble with unconditional love. We keep looking for the conditions. God, we imagine, says to us: "I'll love you if you believe the right beliefs, follow the right rules, go to the right church." There is another reason why the Gospel of grace sometimes falls on deaf ears and it is that there is another side to this matter. Jesus responds to God's assurance of grace by giving his life away. There is a behavioral dimension here. No - God's love does not depend on our performance. But yes - the embrace of God's love and assimilation of grace, the acceptance of our acceptance is behavioral, not simply emotional. God did not send Jesus Christ into the world to make us feel better about who we are, but to persuade us to be better. Now it may be that you can't be better until you feel better, but for sure you have not heard the Gospel. Or if you have heard it, you have

not liked what you heard, resisted it and kept it at arms length;- because by its very nature, it will get under your skin and change your life.

It begins with grace, but it is not "cheap grace," Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught. Grace is costly. The grace that can save your life cost God the life of a beloved son and it costs its recipients a lifetime of faithful discipleship.

What do you want to be when you grow up? Who do you want to be? The answer is related to how you feel about yourself - who you are. Faith says "child of God" but the simple truth is that most people aren't certain what to think about themselves, or they don't think very much of themselves.

One of the intriguing current analyses of our cultural character is something called Co-Dependence. In a popular and widely read book by Anne Wilson Schaef, Co-Dependence is named as a disease which often results in addictive behavior, including alcohol and chemical addiction, but also including behavioral addictions which result often in addictive relationships.

"Co-Dependents have such low self-esteem that they must depend on others to prove their worth. Their main goal in life is to figure out what others want and then deliver that to them - so that they will be safe and accepted... The lives of Co-Dependents are structured by the question, 'What will others think?'

"Co-Dependents must be validated and approved from the outside - and depend on others for their very right to exist.

"Co-Dependents, in a social situation, will sit and wait to discover what others expect before participating in a discussion.

"Co-Dependents will not venture to express intention or opinions until they receive permission or verification from others.

"Co-Dependents won't call the waiter back if the wrong salad is served."

"Co-Dependents," says the author, "get physically sick and develop stress related illness" more frequently than the rest of the population.

As if on cue, the Tribune recently reported a study in the New England Journal of Medicine on a condition known as "Yuppie Disease," the symptoms of which are chronic fatigue, depression, anger and debilitating weakness. [Chicago Tribune, 12/30/88]

The problem is that Co-Dependents are so unsure of self, have such low self esteem, that they must earn their acceptance. And our culture is happy to oblige with a model of acceptance through success, work, get ahead, win, in order to document their own being. "I work - I earn - I win - therefore I am." [Co-Dependence Misunderstood - Mistreated, Anne Wilson Schaef]

I am a little uncomfortable with the concept of Co-Dependence because I can find myself and everyone I know in there somewhere. Any diagnosis which is universal cannot be specific... and yet perhaps it simply is the most recent psychological confirmation of the Christian analysis of the human condition and the truth of the Christian Gospel.

We need something like acceptance or grace in order to live. Or, what you live without acceptance is only half life.

The evidence is overwhelming. Medically, we now know that if something like grace, unconditional love and acceptance is not present, new born babies get sick and die. There is a mountain of evidence to prove that new human life requires love in order to survive. Babies who are caressed, massaged and rocked and sung to - eat more, breath better, grow faster, get stronger.

And the negative evidence is also overwhelming, although not nearly so welcome. If we know anything about human beings it is that if they are told over and over that they don't matter, they will believe it and begin to act out that belief. If we know anything it is that if grace, in the form of love and acceptance, is not extended - people will try to find it. And so it has never been a great psychological mystery why youth gangs have so much appeal in the sub-culture of poverty. Where there is no grace - no unconditional acceptance extended by family, school, neighbors, church - a young person will look for it elsewhere, will desperately seek something which says, "I belong, I matter." The mystery, that incredible mystery, is why we still think it is a problem of law enforcement. The mystery is how, with a straight face and clear conscience, in the name of economic recovery and no new taxes, we can continue to diminish the social services, medical an educational resources available to the people who live in Cabrini-Green. If you tell people enough times that they do not matter, the danger is that they will begin to believe you and conclude that no human life matters. Without grace, human life is not possible.

Somewhere, regardless of who we are, each of us must know that we matter. Regardless of the relative success we have achieved, regardless of the toughness of our exterior - there is a hunger in each of us to know that we are accepted. Our sense of self depends on that.

It begins, we believe, when we hear a word of grace: when we know that the heavens open and the spirit descends and God says - "You are my son... my daughter... my beloved child." But it doesn't stop there. It proceeds when that acceptance translates into new life. The rhythm of faith is grace and demand, acceptance and service.

The grace of God in Jesus Christ invites your response: invites your resolve to live a new life, because you are so thoroughly loved. The Gospel is a challenge to love more and care more and give more and be more - and live more for the sake of your Lord. It is an invitation to answer the question about what you want to be in terms of your new status as God's beloved child and your part in God's work to heal and recreate the world.

That can change your life, can recreate you and raise you up to life more full and joyful and more human than you ever imagined.

Probably the most strenuously intellectual Christian thinker of our age was the late Paul Tillich. I would not ordinarily think of him as a warmly evangelical Christian and so I am always surprised and pleased and moved to read again what he wrote about grace:

"Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when our weakness - our lack of direction - have become intolerable. It strikes us when year after year the longed for perfection does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, 'You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not now know... Do not ask the name now: perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now: perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.'" That's what happened to Jesus of Nazareth when he walked in the Jordan River and allowed his cousin to baptize him. He learned who he was - a child of God, accepted by God, loved by God...

The Co-Dependent people are correct, I believe. We have accepted as normative, the idea that you and I have to prove our worth, have to forge out our right to exist and depend totally on the approval and approbation of others for our value as persons.

There is a lot of pain in trying to live out life like that. And because of that the Gospel is always a little surprising - always fresh. If we will simply hear it - allow it to penetrate our spirits - allow it to draw from us new life, new behavior, new love - it is like the healing grace of soft rain.

"There is a balm in Gilead," the old American Hymn puts it...
"to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead,
to heal the sinsick soul."

That's the Good News.

You can build your life on it.

Amen.